

# The Remedial English Project

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*By A. Augusto Lescano*

For a long time specialists in learning disabilities have said that students with difficulties in normal learning situations should not be exposed to a second or foreign language unless it is needed for cultural adaptation and does not affect the remedial program being followed. The reasons for this belief were: ( 1 ) phonological interferences, especially where there is a speech impairment; ( 2 ) cognitive difficulties due to students failing to give attention to appropriate stimuli; and ( 3 ) memory failure.

Throughout my teaching career, I have been interested in the problems slow learners face with L2. This paper gives the conclusions of a five-year research project with slow learners studying English in primary and secondary schools.

At the outset, we should consider who is a slow learner and who is learning-disabled (LD). Statistics show that two out of every ten students in a class are slow learners. The number within the whole school population may not be very high, but just the fact that there are slow learners demands our concern. Actually, there are two kinds of slow learners. The first is the student who does not learn successfully due to general socio-cultural problems, frustrating past language classroom experiences, inadequate use of strategies, or lack of interest. The second type of slow learner is the student formally diagnosed as "learning-disabled" by specialists in child psychology.

In Peru, although public schools cannot afford to assist LDs effectively, there are a growing number of private schools in Lima devoted to aiding and mainstreaming such learners. These institutions range from preschool to secondary levels. One of the leaders in programs for the learning-disabled is PALESTRA. The project presented here, the Remedial English Project (REP) was initiated by PALESTRA in March 1992. A number of students in the experimental group had been formally diagnosed as learning-disabled. The rest belonged to the school's low-level language class due to their apparent indifference and poor performance in learning English.

The project started with systematic data collection pertaining to student attitudes towards L2. Later on, such, information was contrasted with the students' typical learning styles in order to construct a profile of the "slow learner" of English.

Although conditions do not always allow schools to open remedial English classrooms, I believe that we, as teachers, have something to say about what is best for our students, especially if they have specific learning needs. Establishing "special classes" on the basis described below will not only personalize instruction, but also demonstrate our true concern for their actual progress.

## The Approach

Traditional approaches requiring memorization, mimicry, and focused listening were not successful because they insufficiently utilized the five channels of sensory perception. But dyslexics, slight or severe, cannot easily reproduce words or phrases seen only a few times.

Modern trends agree on the importance of notion and function in teaching communication. However, a functional approach is not sufficient to optimize success for slow learners. Some variations in the methodology and techniques need to be made. Here are some of these changes:

**A. Program content:** Slow learners often lack self-esteem. But they are also very sensitive to exaggerated or artificial praise. Thus, set minimum standards for your objectives and expectations, based on what the students can achieve and not necessarily on what they should accomplish for their level. In this way, goals can be reached at every stage, and positive feedback will come naturally.

Their weakest skills are generally writing and reading. That is why, for example, hyperactive or attention-deficit students tend to disturb the class and misbehave whenever these skills are emphasized. Focus your priority goals on oral expression and (graded) listening skills, and devote less time and effort to polishing grammar structures, spelling, and detailed reading.

Many slow learners show difficulties in perception. They tend to ignore details and go for overall comprehension and production. They do not notice, for instance, the apostrophe or the plural forms when reading. In the same way, some may omit forms of speech when writing or speaking. Since many of these problems are also present in their L1 use, we cannot expect a lot of drilling to help very much. Experience has taught me that these students enjoy classes which demand more active participation in speaking. The only times when this did not prove successful was when learners felt rejection due to frustrating exposures to the language in front of peers.

The point is that the students' utterances must fulfill communicative objectives. Conversational activities appeal to their easily distracted personalities. Devote most of your class plan to doing them regularly. Oral projects demanding descriptions, storytelling, discussions, etc., can also generate interest and competition in class.

**B. Activities and techniques:** Every step in the learning process should be carefully planned. Let us go through each stage briefly:

*Warmup* . Most slow learners need support and encouragement to maintain their interest in the language and in the class. They are not usually motivated by the reward of knowing a new language per se. Active involvement and positive reinforcement are recommended throughout the lesson. Boost their interest by using a different warmup activity every day.

*Presentation* . Slow learners work more effectively when they know the functional objectives for a lesson. Discuss the relevance of the functional objective and obtain the students' commitment to learn. It is also advisable to break down the objective into component parts.

*Controlled practice* . Clear instructions, and use of cues, prompts, and monitoring techniques are suggested. The tasks must be related to specific criteria, each one not taking longer than ten or

fifteen minutes, due to the students' short attention span. Use corrective feedback and reinforcement, and aim at increasing fluency first, then accuracy and appropriateness. Remember that LD students frequently encounter a lot of difficulty at this stage, because they must retain structures and vocabulary. Periodic practice may not always be sufficient, and they will need other strategies, such as overlearning (a lot of drill activities), reinforcement, and also self-management skills.

*Production* . LDs have great difficulty when learning objectives require generalization or transfer of skills to other contexts and settings. We cannot expect this capability just to happen. It must be systematically taught. One suggestion is to center dialogs and stories around contextualized communicative functions likely to happen to the students in real-life environments.

Try to consider activities that involve the use of different sensory channels: auditory, visual, tactile, or kinesthetic. Some slow learners have a single sensory preference, so they acquire language primarily through that channel. Widen their sensory learning styles with activities like blindfolded pair or group work, guessing, etc.

There are many motivational resources at hand to enhance active participation, i.e. bulletin boards, reward tokens, bonus points, etc.

Providing slow learners with a feeling of success is a hard job, but the following activities are useful:

- i. Give daily evaluations.
- ii. Use simple vocabulary in directions and instructions.
- iii. Use standard formats and limited types of responses for each assignment.
- iv. Provide multi-sensory prompts to elicit correct responses.
- v. Analyze and break down difficult tasks.
- vi. Increase time-on-task rates (more teacher questions, group participation, effective use of signals, gestures, etc.).

**C. Testing:** I have obtained excellent results by presenting tests divided into two components: an objective section including multiple-choice, true or false, fill-in, matching, or other similar types of exercises, worth up to 50% of the overall score; and an essay section with exercises like guided dialogs, broad general questions, and free production. Since slow learners show limited retention, they need specific guidelines and cues to recall the information they acquire.

**D. Behavior and discipline:** Many emotionally-disturbed children reflect deficient learning skills and strategies. Many of them come from family environments characterized by conflict and/or neglect; and because they are insecure, these children demonstrate inappropriate/disruptive behavior towards peers and teachers. Since the class itself may provide social reinforcement, the teacher should avoid confrontation or argument with these children in front of their classmates. Call the problem student aside on a one-to-one basis, discuss the problem, and set boundaries for the appropriate behavior.

Slow learners tend to ignore parent-like lectures. Talk less and provide behavioral rewards that are more socially positive, such as group cooperation, respect, and neatness. This is pertinent whether you are teaching at the primary or secondary levels.

I am sure the weaker students will benefit from our better understanding of their strengths and weaknesses. As long as we continue trying new ways to assist these children, they will be able to make progress and most of all, overcome the fear and/or negative impressions of L2.

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